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Abstract

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Psychology, Personality, Curriculum Design, Education, Vietnamese people

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The question of happiness and how to obtain a content state of mind has been raised and discussed for thousands of years, from the foundation of Aristotelianism in the work of a Greek philosopher to Taoism in ancient China or the meditation focus of Zen in the East and other similar doctrines throughout history. Though they may vary in principles or practices, they all, to some extent, share the same purpose: achieving inner harmony and controlling consciousness of self. However, over the years, despite incremental modern scientific breakthroughs and transformed living conditions, the feelings of unhappiness, depression or emptiness still exist inside many human beings. Particularly in the 21st century, human life is changing in unprecedented ways, and it seems that the new form of ontological anxiety cannot merely be applied with certain formulas from philosophies of previous centuries.

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi came into life as a guideline for the contemporary society to deal with the question of happiness or existential dread. Csikszentmihalyi's ideas are not generated or cumulated from traditional ancient philosophies but based on the current specific cultural context supported with data from more than 20 years of research. The book seems to provide the proper answer to the true inner calling of many people and helps to reconsider what it takes to achieve autonomy in consciousness.

As stated right on the first pages of the book, the purpose of the author is to discuss general principles together with real life examples to transform meaningless lives into happy ones. The book is written in a reader-friendly style so anyone without specialized background knowledge can read and transfer theory to practice if they have the desire to improve the meaning of their lives.

Before starting the insightful discussion of the principles of optimal experiences, the author provides a brief explanation of some key concepts in the operation of consciousness. The model of consciousness discussed in the book is based on principles of information theory, which includes knowledge about how sensory data are processed, stored and used – the

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dynamics of attention and memory. From this approach, consciousness is seen as intentionally ordered information. Therefore, consciousness is believed to reflect changes with selection, actively form events, impose them with a reality of their own, and provide a reflection of “life” – the collection of all one has heard, seen, felt, hoped and suffered from cradle to grave. Particularly, from Csikszentmihalyi’s viewpoint of consciousness, “attention” is especially emphasized.

Though attentional structures vary in each individual and culture, they decide what will appear or not appear in consciousness from the selection of relevant bits of information from the potential myriads of bits available. On that account, attention is given another name: “psychic energy.” It is the energy that helps shape memories, thoughts and feelings. It is seen as the most important tool in improving the quality of experience. What comes as a big surprise from the author’s discussion of consciousness is the ability to achieve optimal experience depends on how each individual spends this type of energy.

When the information that keeps coming into awareness is correspondent to goals, the psychic energy flows effortlessly. It is the state in which “people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p. 4). The author continues to affirm that when a person can organize his consciousness to feel flow as much as he can, the quality of life is undoubtedly going to be upgraded. In other words, the self grows and becomes more complex as a result of experiencing flow. Flow is undoubtedly significant because of the enjoyment it adds to life and the self-confidence it builds in each person to develop skills and make considerable contributions to humankind. Therefore, the achievement of complexity of self can be seen as the basis and underlying thesis in almost all arguments and discussion in the rest of the book.

At this point, what urges the readers to finish the book is most likely the question: *What are the ways to gain optimal experience and improve the quality of life?* A great discovery from reading the book is that there are two main strategies for obtaining enjoyment and the true meaning of life. First is the effort to adjust external conditions to match one’s goals. The other is to change how one experiences external conditions to make them better fit the goals. In order to make sure one succeeds with the strategies, he or she can reflect on the eight elements of enjoyment (p. 49) as follows:

- (1) The enjoyment of confronting tasks that one has a chance of completing
- (2) The ability to concentrate on what one is doing
- (3) Clear goals of the task
- (4) Immediate feedback from the task
- (5) Deep and effortless involvement in the task without the awareness of worries and frustrations of everyday life
- (6) A sense of control over one’s actions
- (7) The paradox of control: Disappearance of concern for the self but stronger sense of self after the flow experience
- (8) Transformation of time: The sense of duration of time is altered

However, the author also points out some obstacles to experiencing flow. One type originates within the individual himself and includes “anhedonia,” meaning a lack of pleasure

and excessive self-consciousness. The other group of obstacles emerges from the environment and may include natural and social impediments. Notably, the social barriers refer to states of social pathology including anomie (i.e. lack of rules) and alienation. Anomie may cause anxiety and alienation may lead to boredom. One needs to be aware of these obstacles to enjoyment in order to overcome any of them while trying to control their consciousness.

Throughout the book, Csikszentmihalyi proposes various sub-strategies to experience flow. A simple method that many people often ignore is exploring their physical equipment. Each sensory organ or each movement can potentially produce optimal experience. One can find enjoyment in some physical activities such as sports, fitness, dancing, martial arts, yoga or through senses, namely seeing, music or tasting. Another source of flow is from symbolic skills. Many people can find optimal experience in various conceptual, political and intellectual activities. In particular, passion devoted to sciences can bring delights. Additionally, one can improve the quality of life through transforming jobs into flow-producing activities. Jobs can be redesigned to help people improve autotelic personalities, visualize opportunities for taking action, sharpen their skills and make feasible goals. It is also necessary to reduce stress and pressure in work via finer organization, empowerment of responsibility, better home life, leisure patterns, etc.

However, what if people cannot find enjoyment from the above strategies? What should be done if all they feel is solitude and loneliness? For such cases, the author suggests improving family bonds, friendship or engagement in a wider community. There are also certain moments in life when chaos or tragedies happen. In such situations, courage, resilience, perseverance, mature defenses or transformational coping are very essential. The author argues that those who can transform a hopeless circumstance into a new flow activity will have the capacity to enjoy themselves and become stronger from the difficulty.

The most important strategy of all in improving quality of life is unifying all experiences into meaningful patterns – life themes. The life theme is similar to a game that assigns the rules and steps one must take to experience flow in order to make existence enjoyable. A life theme gives meaning to everything that happens. Life themes are categorized into two types: authentic and inauthentic. The former refers to the theme of a person who is aware that choices are free and who makes decisions based on a rational judgment of his life. The latter describes a person who makes decisions based on what other people are doing and on what he feels ought to be done. Both types help add meaning to life but each type has its own benefits and drawbacks. Again, the topic of complexity of self is revisited. The two life themes represent two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Complexity consists of both processes. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience is not only helpful for those seeking the true meaning of life. It also has applicable values in education. Pedagogically, transforming lessons into flow-producing activities is both a dire desire and a challenge to educators. The principles put forward in the book shed more light on innovative practices that focus on learners' interest, intrinsic motivation and other personalizing strategies. To help students feel "flow," the eight elements of enjoyment need to be created in every lesson. It is necessary to provide tasks that are appropriate to learners' levels and based on their prior knowledge so that they can see the chance of completion and have the motivation to take the tasks. Clear goals and immediate feedback are also important to bring learners a sense of control and ability to concentrate on the tasks. Finally, only when students find interest and enjoyable experience in the tasks can they feel hours elapsing in minutes. Developing both physical and sensory skills among students is

also a helpful strategy in education with regards to creating optimal experience in learning. As a result of all related effort, with regular flow moments in completing learning tasks, the love for lifelong learning, motivation to explore science, and love for science will gradually be developed inside individual learners.

As can be inferred from the book, students' optimal experience in learning does not merely depends on teachers' and schools' efforts but on parents and family as well. Psychic energy can be conserved and created in families that can provide an autotelic context to individual members. Children in such families are free to develop interests in activities that will expand their selves. The author also claims that development of coping skills is most easily accomplished when a young person has achieved a strong sense of self, and transformational skills usually develop by late adolescence. Therefore, if teachers and parents are aware of this critical period in "self" development and have proper collaboration, children can prepare a foundation for a better quality of life.

Finally, a favorable working environment for teachers is also important to bring about innovative practice in teaching careers. Teachers can be autotelic workers if the job they are doing resembles flow activities, and the working environment is redesigned to develop autotelic personalities.

Apart from its implications for education in general, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* is also of great potential value for education in Vietnam in particular. The 21st century has witnessed fundamental changes in the whole nation's education system. One of its main focuses now is building a friendly environment for education with the motto "friendly schools, active students" and "every teacher is a good example of behavior, self-learning, and creativity" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 21). To support active learners and creative teachers as stated in the motto, it is important to create the feeling of flow in learning and teaching. The principles for an optimal experience proposed by Csikszentmihalyi can be applicable to achieve this direction for education in Vietnam in the 21st century. The next focus of the nation's education until 2020 is to carry out the Human Resource Development Strategy aiming to have about 44 million personnel trained by 2020 (accounting for 70% of the working labor) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 22). This is an ambitious goal for national education. As Csikszentmihalyi proves, when autotelic workers are created, professional efficiency will be improved. Therefore, if flow theories are taken into consideration in implementing educational strategies and policies, it is believed that Vietnam education will change focus from quantity development into quality development as it claims (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 22).

Generally speaking, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* imparts influential values applicable to many people, who are discerning the meaning of their lives and struggling to get out of common dilemmas in the modern world. The greatest value of the book, personally speaking, is seen in Csikszentmihalyi's discussion about consciousness control to produce flow in the first chapters and the complexity of self in the final chapter. However, some arguments concerning specific strategies to transform ordinary activities into flow activities are not quite satisfactory. It would have been nice to have a clearer and more detailed discussion about redesigning the working place or an example of a real life model that has successfully promoted optimal experiences among employees from employers' vision and desire for change. All in all, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* is still worthwhile reading, not only for the general population but also for researchers and administrators in making contributions to a better quality of life for humankind.

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Diem Thi Ngoc Hoang received her PhD degree in Linguistics from Vietnam National University. She is currently a full-time master's student at Lehigh University, PA. Before her further education in the U.S., she worked at Thainguyen University in Vietnam as a teacher trainer. Her interests include Language and Culture, Instructional Technology, and Teaching Methodology.